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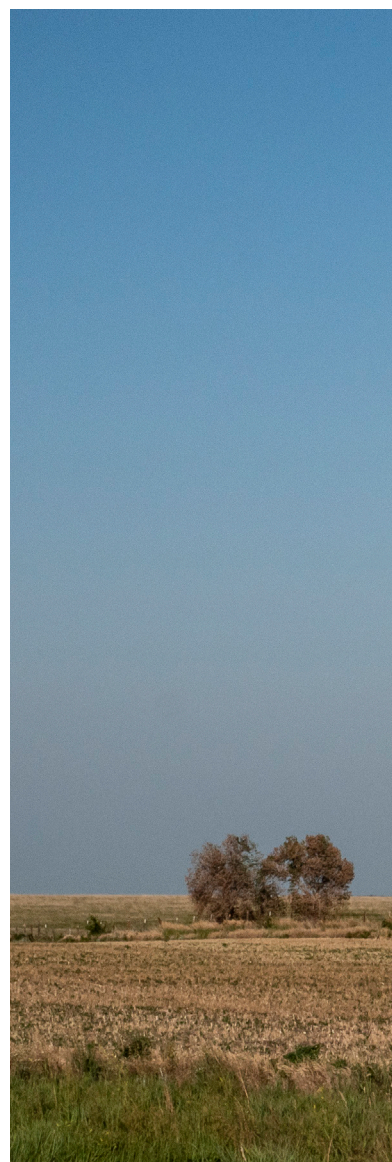
# WORKING LANDS CONSERVATION PROGRAMS ARE ESSENTIAL TO PUBLIC HEALTH

## OVERVIEW

**F**arm bill “working lands” conservation programs help farmers adopt, expand, and continue conservation practices, often benefiting their farms’ short and long-term productivity and providing “ecosystem services” for all. These ecosystem services include conservation of water, improved air and soil quality, provision of food and habitat for pollinators, carbon sequestration, nutrient cycling, and biodiversity conservation. These services are vital to ecosystem and public health, and they have real economic value.

While many farmers value the benefits of good stewardship of their lands, some conservation practices provide only minimal economic benefits to individual farmers. In addition, market pressures can induce production practices that can be detrimental to the conservation of land and resources. As a result, a farmer who wants to adopt farming practices that employ greater conservation measures may face prohibitive costs. Farm bill conservation programs not only help farmers learn about opportunities and strategies to adopt better conservation practices, but they also help farmers defray costs.

By preserving and expanding farm bill conservation programs—such as the Conservation Stewardship Program (CSP) and the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)—the farm bill can help address both ecosystem and public health concerns associated with agriculture and provide economic benefits to farmers.



# WORKING LANDS PROGRAMS ADDRESS PUBLIC HEALTH CONCERNS

**CONCERN:** The depletion of water resources. Agriculture accounts for 80 percent of water use in the United States. Too often water is used excessively and inefficiently for irrigation and livestock. The diminishing water supply poses threats to ecosystems, farmers, communities, and U.S. food security.

**SOLUTION:** Conservation programs incentivize farmers to implement solutions such as improved irrigation systems, which enable farmers to optimize water usage on their land. Other conservation practices, such as crop rotation and no till systems, enhance soil quality and aid in water retention, reducing irrigation needs.

**CONCERN:** Impact on water quality. Agriculture methods may have negative impacts on water quality by elevating concentrations of nutrients, fecal coliforms, and sediment loads. Fertilizers, pesticides and manure can leach into nearby water sources, polluting rivers, lakes, and groundwater. Agricultural runoff can lead to toxic algal blooms and elevated nitrates in drinking water, both of which are associated with a variety of health issues. Nitrates and other pesticide exposures have also been linked to some cancers.

**SOLUTION:** Conservation practices—such as cover crops and rotational grazing—reduce nitrogen and pesticide runoff and decrease reliance on chemical inputs. This leads to improved water quality and can reduce the risk of harmful exposures among workers and community members.

**CONCERN:** Climate change. The manufacture and application of farm inputs, such as fertilizers and pesticides, produce greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change—increasing the likelihood of extreme weather.

**SOLUTION:** Conservation programs enable farmers to sustain and often increase yields while using fewer manufactured inputs. These conservation practices also improve soil quality and enhance farm resiliency in the face of extreme weather events associated with climate change.

# CRITICAL LEGISLATION

Working lands conservation programs, CSP and EQIP, provide America's farmers with the opportunity to balance production and profitability with environmental restoration and stewardship. While both programs have similar long-term goals, each has distinct enrollment targets. EQIP is an entry point for farmers to begin conducting conservation practices on their land, while CSP is aimed at conservation-engaged farmers and ranchers who have met a conservation "stewardship threshold" and want to expand their efforts. Both programs are popular among farmers, who want to care for the land that sustains their livelihood while maintaining the land's productivity for future generations.

In recent years, up to 75 percent of eligible applicants to CSP and EQIP go unfunded due to limited funding and high demand. Current proposals to combine these distinct programs, reduce conservation funding, and strip core elements from CSP would diminish the ability of these programs to

protect and improve ecosystems and the public's health. Increased funding is necessary to fulfill the promise and achieve the benefits of working lands programs. Moreover, additional support for the monitoring, evaluation and reporting of conservation program efforts is also necessary to optimize their implementation.

Finally, while most working lands programs support public health, one aspect of EQIP does not. The current farm bill orders that EQIP set aside 60 percent of funds for livestock operations. In many cases, these funds help industrial food animal production facilities comply with environmental regulations while growing even larger. As a result, EQIP funds enable these facilities to avoid paying for the true costs of their environmental impacts and help facilitate their continuation and expansion, leading to other environmental and public health harms not currently addressed via regulation. Elimination of this set-aside supports environmental and public health outcomes.

## ACTION

- Protect and increase funding for farm bill working lands conservation programs, and specifically for EQIP and CSP as distinct programs.
- Increase funding for monitoring, evaluation and reporting to more fully understand program impacts and optimize program implementation.
- Support elimination of the 60 percent livestock set aside in EQIP.

Contact: Bob Martin, Program Director, Food System Policy at [rmarti57@jhu.edu](mailto:rmarti57@jhu.edu)

Johns Hopkins  
Center for a Livable Future  
111 Market Place, Suite 840  
Baltimore, MD 21202